

One of a Kind

By Paul Danner; Illustrations by Doug Shuler

It had been a really bad day.

Sconn sipped the Venaarian Cringe-Ale and one of his eyes was forced closed by the bitter taste of the yellowish liquid. He wondered if the "cringe" was supposed to come from the drink itself, or the obscene amount of credits the wake-up juice cost. *That's the price you pay for wild nights*, he thought.

With a shrug, he took another swallow and scanned the Binary Bar's late afternoon crowd. Sconn noted that he merged seamlessly with it, which for a thief was a good thing, especially on an Imperially held world like Venaari. If nobody could remember your face, they couldn't give the authorities a good description...

Sconn prided himself on his skill as a social chameleon, but at the same time it annoyed him. The thief enjoyed being the center of attention, preferring to stand out, especially in the faceless parade of fearful drones that the Empire so enjoyed turning the local populaces into. At the present time, however, he could ill afford nonconformity. The current lack of business was making his credits disappear faster than an Imperial slaver at a Wookiee family reunion.

Sconn was also running out of time. The rent on his apartment was due by the next morning and his Devaronian landlord didn't take excuses -- just solid Imperial credits. Sconn needed a job and he needed one fast...

"Times are tough," he whispered into his mug, "when the greatest thief in this whole sector can't find work."

Sconn glanced up at the high ceiling of the Binary Bar and stared at what he was considering to be his last resort. The thief wasn't crazy about stealing part of the decor from one of his favorite watering holes, but when times are tough ... He studied the old swoop hanging from the quartet of duracables and began his appraisal. Mobquet Nebulon-R Racer, most likely. The swoop would definitely need its repulsorlift unit and turbothrust engine replaced, but even in its current shape, the vehicle would net him at least 500 credits. Maybe a thousand or more if he could get his hands on cheap parts. Expertly the thief began surveying the room, trying to figure out his best route of entry and escape should desperation force him to return after hours.

That's when he noticed her, slipping in from the street and into the crowded dive. She glanced about like a wary cat as she maneuvered to the bar. The woman seemed young, about Sconn's age, and wore a cloak that hid most of her curves.

Sconn soon found that he couldn't take his eyes off her, though he wasn't exactly sure why. Sure, she was pretty, but he'd certainly seen prettier. The thief just couldn't explain it. The dark-haired beauty just had a certain air of mystery about her. There was something going on. And if there was anything Sconn was familiar with, it was intrigue.

She sat at the bar, but looked uncomfortable, taking sidelong glances at the beings around her. *She's not a dive-hopper*, Sconn reasoned. The bartender approached and slid a mug of clear liquid over to her. As she reached for it, the overweight Venaarian gave an almost imperceptible nod. Tossing a few credits onto the bar, she took a sip of the mug and walked over to a corner table. The one she selected was removed from the center of activity and well-shadowed.

Sconn pursed his lips, and this time it wasn't a reaction to the Cringe-Ale. Something was definitely up. The bartender was busy, yet quickly had a drink for the girl. One she didn't even order. The familiarity might be explained, though -- the



girl could be a regular, but her body language at the bar just didn't support that scenario. Besides, Sconn had a feeling she wasn't a recurring patron, and his feelings usually kept him alive.

The thief's interest was piqued. Two of his favorite things, women and mysteries, had just surfaced right in front of him. Unfortunately, that's when the woman noticed him staring at her. As their gazes locked, Sconn saw her eyes widen a bit, as if she was worried that he was somebody who shouldn't have seen her. Thinking quickly, the thief flashed his best grin and winked at her.

Relief swiftly crossed the woman's face, and as she looked down at her drink, Sconn swore he saw her lips twitch into a smile. As Sconn started to consider the possibilities, chaos erupted in the bar.

A young Venaarian man burst inside, running at full speed and knocking over two customers in his hurry. A fresh blaster burn marred his right shoulder. His eyes, wild with fear, quickly scanned the room.

Sconn saw the beauty look up and watched as a look of shock spread across her face. The thief also noted that the bartender wore an expression similar to the girl's.

As the wild-eyed man opened his mouth to yell something, the sizzling burst of a blaster bolt cut off the sound. He was thrown forward like a rag doll. The young man landed atop an occupied table, sending food and drinks crashing to the floor.

Five stormtroopers, their white armor gleaming, followed the bolt inside. Each one brandished a standard issue blaster rifle except for the leader, who carried a powerful BlasTech T-15. Sconn figured it was the heavy T-15 snub rifle that was responsible for sending the Venaarian on his short-lived aerial excursion.

The leader's crackling voice filtered through his helmet. "Nobody move! This establishment is officially sealed by the Empire!"

Most of the surprised customers obeyed, turning their fearful glances away from the troopers. The bartender quickly ducked down behind the bar, which Sconn considered a smart move, until the man stood back up with a grenade launcher.

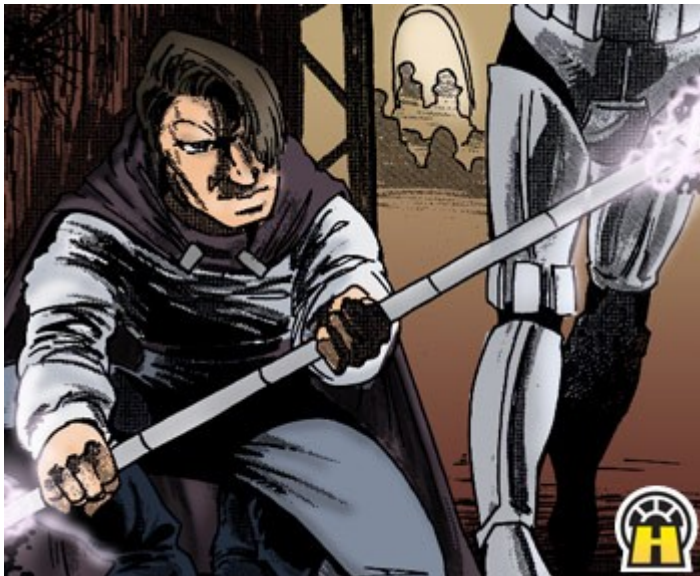
"Go!" screamed the heavy Venaarian as he fired into the midst of the stormtroopers. The young woman bolted from her booth and headed for the door leading to the kitchen.

Sconn dove from his chair, ducking under the table, as the grenade sailed overhead. The thief quickly reached under his cloak, feeling that familiar silver handle...

The stun grenade exploded with a deafening cry, and three of the stormtroopers, as well as a few unfortunate customers, went down.

"Take him! I'll get the girl!" After barking out his orders, the leader charged forward.

The remaining trooper opened fire, hitting the bar as the Venaarian ducked back down behind it, presumably to reload. Bits of charred metal exploded into the air. Picking the wrong moment to resurface, the bartender took a blaster bolt to the chest and went down with a groan before he could fire off the fresh grenade.



The young woman saw him fall and stopped in her tracks, a look of horror on her face. "Nooo!"

The leader charged her, turning the heavy T-15 rifle towards the unmoving target.

From his vantage point under the table, Sconn looked on. "I'm going to hate myself for this," he muttered.

With a snap of his wrist, the long silver handle exploded into activity, locking into a two-meter-long staff. With the tap of a hidden switch, both ends of the staff began to crackle and hum with stun energy.

The stormtrooper leader continued to move forward, taking aim at his quarry. The girl

looked up just then, as if sensing the danger. Her eyes widened as she waited for the shot that, at that range, would bring her down for good.

It never came.

Moving with lightning speed, the crouched Sconn swung the staff with all his strength, catching the leader in the shins with the weapon. Using the leverage afforded him by his low center of gravity, Sconn drove the staff backwards and up, sending the stormtrooper flipping forward, literally head over heels. The heavy armored figure crashed atop a table with a surprised cry. Unable to support the applied force, the cheap plastic groaned and collapsed in on itself, showering his pristine armor with Angerian Fishak Surprise.

The remaining stormtrooper whirled around, drawing a bead on Sconn. Caught out in the open, the thief knew he had one chance. Sconn lifted his right arm, bending the hand at the wrist. The wide sleeve of his shirt fell back, revealing a silver wrist gauntlet. The condensed particle beam streaked high into the air, missing the stormtrooper completely.

The armored warrior chuckled and prepared to fire, but only got as far as lifting his gun when the swoop -- previously hanging from the ceiling by the now severed duracables -- hit him squarely across the back, driving him to the floor and pinning him there.

Sconn exhaled loudly in relief, then turned to the woman. She was trying to help the fallen bartender, who, to an emotionally unattached eye, was obviously beyond any help.

The dying Venaarian reached up, his fingers grasping the edges of her dark cloak and pulling her close. "Shandria ... must get it to New Republic. Imperative... that..." The rest was lost to eternity. Tears welled up in Shandria's eyes and she shut them tight, trying to staunch the flow.

Shaking his head, Sconn ran over to her. "Look, I'm sorry about your friend, but you've got to get out of here."

A blaster bolt suddenly slammed into the wall behind the bar, barely missing Sconn's head and shattering a large mirror.

"Correction. *We've* got to get out of here." Sconn grabbed the dazed girl by the arm and dragged her into the kitchen as another flurry of bolts exploded into the bar.

Sconn peeked around the corner, spotting at least a dozen more stormtroopers approaching the entrance in standard cover formation. He dove forward, grabbing the reloaded grenade launcher from next to the bartender's body. Lifting up, he fired the weapon out the door, then sprinted back into the kitchen as the stun grenade exploded. He was rewarded by a few mechanically filtered screams.

"That should slow 'em down a little," the thief said as he glanced back around the corner.

The stormtroopers were still coming. With another group of their comrades down, though, the approach was more cautious. Sconn gently urged her forward. "Head for the back door."

Shandria flashed him a worried look.

He returned a reassuring grin. "Don't worry. I'm good at this kind of stuff. We'll make it." She still didn't look overly convinced, so he quickly added, "I promise."

They sprinted through the messy kitchen, passing a row of storage closets, and headed toward the back door. Sconn slammed his palm against the control panel and the door swung open.

"Wait here. I'll check it out." He dove outside, staff raised defensively. Sconn checked one side of the alley. A dead end. The thief turned to examine the other. It led to the street -- where 10 stormtroopers were exiting a Venaari strike speeder.

Swallowing hard, Sconn stumbled back, tripping over the row of garbage container awaiting removal. In the process, he managed to inadvertently knock the door closed. As he turned to pull it back open, he heard the locking mechanism kick in.

"Auto-lock. Great." He stared at the keys on the panel. "And I have no idea what the code is."

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Inside, Shandria heard stormtroopers approaching. Glancing over her shoulder, she saw them carefully filing into the bar. When she turned back around, the young man who had helped her was gone and the door was shut and locked. She started pounding on it. "Let me out!"

'Let me in!' Sconn's harried voice echoed from the other side, accompanied by frenzied banging, then a barrage of blaster bolts.

Shandria started fiddling with the control panel, then balled her fists in frustration. 'It's jammed!'

Outside, Sconn, shook his head. "Lovely." He was being showered by more and more refuse as the troopers blew holes in the garbage containers he was using for cover.

"How did I get myself into this?" The thief shook his head and reached into his carry pouch. After fishing around inside, Sconn pulled out a thin, half-sphere of metal with only a small crimson light marring its surface. "Better over-prepared than under the ground."

He crawled over to the door and attached the half-sphere to the control panel. Sconn rapped his fist sharply on the door. "Get back! Get back!" he screamed.

Sconn dove back into the center of the garbage containers and pulled out a small silver control unit. The thief tapped the button and closed his eyes. The half-sphere exploded in a shower of light. The door swung open.

Sconn grinned in spite of himself, then was horrified to see Shandria stick her head out the door.

"What's going on?" she demanded to know.

The thief dove forward, barely avoiding being roasted by a volley of blaster bolts, and shoved her and himself back inside, pulling the door closed behind them. "You stick your head out where it doesn't belong again and you're liable to get it shot off,"

"Sorry --"

Sconn shrugged, gesturing behind him, "The great white welcoming committee back there kind of rules out that exit." The thief sighed as he heard the familiar heavy armored footsteps approaching from the other direction. "It looks like we're trapped."

Shandria put her hands on her hips and glowered at him. "I thought you said you were good at this."

Sconn shrugged helplessly.

"This is some rescue." She glanced around, looking over her shoulder at the storage closets. When she saw the sign that read "Danger -- Gravidinian Ale," she grinned.

Shandria grabbed Sconn by the arm and led him toward the closet. "Come on. We're getting out of here!"

Sconn pulled the door closed and locked it. He listened at the door for a second then frowned. "They're coming."

A small glowlamp flickered weakly, offering poor illumination at best. Sconn stared at the huge containers of ale, which were adorned with a series of large, vented holes near their tops.

He glanced at Shandria. "And you've got us cornered."

"Hand me your staff, will you?"

'What for?'

"You looking forward to an Imperial interrogation?"

The thief reluctantly parted with his staff. "Just be careful with it. It's one of a kind." He flashed a self-satisfied grin. "Just like me."

Shandria took the staff and rolled her eyes.

Sconn glanced around. He saw the warnings posted on the containers and the wall and frowned. "You picked a wonderful spot, too. If they don't get us, our hiding place will." The thief shook his head. "We're sitting mynocks in here."

"Do you ever do anything but complain?" Shandria was climbing on top of a container. She reached up with Sconn's staff, and extended it towards the ceiling, which she began to poke at.

"What are you doing?"

"Do you know anything about Gravdinian Ale?"

'Wonderful. We're about to die and you're playing Holo-Quiz."

She ignored that. "It tastes really good. Kind of sweet, really. Unfortunately, it gives off a very strong vapor until it properly ferments. In concentrated amounts, the vapor can be lethal."

"Oh, this just gets better and better."

Shandria continued to poke and prod in the shadows, "It's a hassle and a danger, which is why very few bars carry it. Those that do, however, have to take precautions. So, when storing it, they need a special room with enough..." She paused as she heard the staff hit something hollow and metallic.

She lifted the stick further, and raising up with it was a one-meter square grille, full of holes. It covered a shaft of similar size leading up into dim light.

"Ventilation," Shandria finished, and grinned.

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Sconn knocked the top grille free and proceeded to crawl out of the open shaft onto the roof of the bar. Reaching back down, he quickly pulled Shandria up next to him. "That was pretty amazing," he said.

"Thanks. But you rescued me first. I was just returning the favor." A smile dawned slowly on her face, like a dazzling sun.

Sconn almost started to blush, averting his eyes. "Well, I, uh, that is..." He cleared his throat. "Thanks... And you're welcome." He glanced down the shaft. "We'd better get moving. It's not going to take them long to figure out where we disappeared to."

"So, now what?"

"Good question."

The thief crawled forward, peeking out over the edge of the roof. Two more strike speeders were parked out front. A sizable guard watched the front of the building, surrounding a tall, thin man with a hooked beak of a nose. By his uniform, self-important stance, and position of relative guarded safety, Sconn assumed the man was the Imperial-In-charge.

Frowning, the thief scuttled over the roof and checked the back of the building. The strike speeder he had spotted earlier at the mouth of the alley was still there. He could see two stormtroopers watching the back door.

Sconn motioned Shandria over and gestured at the vehicle. "Can you pilot one of those things?"

She nodded. "Why?"

Sconn grinned, taking the staff in two hands. He flipped the small switch in the center of the handle and with a soft hum, both ends of the weapon began to charge with stun energy once more.

Shandria pursed her lips. "My, my... we're full of surprises, aren't we?"

"You ain't seen nothing yet." The thief grinned, then turned and jumped off the roof. Shandria watched in amazement as he landed right between the stormtroopers, who weren't expecting any company to drop in.

The first trooper took the stun staff right to the helmet, sending him crumpled to the floor. The second managed to lift his blaster, but Sconn was faster. His staff struck like a steel deathsnake. The tip of the weapon struck the trooper's gun, sending it spiralling into the air. Sconn delivered two quick strikes to the defenseless trooper's gut, dropping him like a rock.

Without missing a beat, the thief then caught the trooper's rifle in mid-air and turned around just as the strike speeder pilot exited his craft, blaster pistol in hand. The pilot took two quick bolts from Sconn's captured gun and tumbled to the ground.

Sconn spun back around to stare up at Shandria and bowed theatrically. As he lifted back up, he was utterly shocked to see Shandria holding a small holdout blaster pointed right at him. Before he could even move a centimeter, she fired.

The bolt sailed right over his head and a pained grunt sounded from behind him. Sconn whirled around to see another Imperial, dressed similarly to the pilot, go down. The man was holding his chest with one hand and in the other held the blaster pistol that would have shot the thief in the back.

"You forgot the co-pilot, laser brain," Shandria said as she hopped down to join him.

Sconn slowly nodded, mumbling his thanks.

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The hook-nosed Imperial, Major Daraada, waited in annoyance for the woman to be found. Unfortunately, his trigger-happy stormtroopers had eliminated two of the New Republic spies. The last two of the cell he had been trying to expose for months.

There was still the woman, of course, but she was the youngest of the group and would know comparatively little in a New Republic cell that was already veiled in secrecy. Not to mention the deaths meant two less interrogation victims for the Major. And as much as he would have enjoyed the extra torture sessions, taking the woman alive was much more important. She had the stolen datacard. *As well as plenty of other interesting facts just waiting to be released in a flood of pain*, Major Daraada thought with a grin.

Daraada was infamous for not employing an Imperial interrogator. He enjoyed the task too much himself to give anyone else the pleasure. Simple pleasures were always the best. Since his promotion, he had less time to enjoy such things, which is why he relished live prisoners.

When the woman talked, and the datacard was recovered, there might be another promotion in it. One that would take him off the stinking planet he was currently attached to. The Major paused his contemplation for a moment to sniff the stale Venaarian air, laced with the stench of cheap ale. *Not much longer*, he thought gleefully. His troops had cut off all escape routes.



Shandria
L'hnnar

was as good as his, and whatever fool had attempted to help her was trapped as well. Daraada didn't need information from the would-be hero, so he would just have his head. Maybe on a force pike, the Major mused, stuck outside the Imperial Command Center. A message to the rest of the city -- to let the populace know that the Empire still meant business, its iron fist securely grasping the worlds still under its influence. Once that was accomplished, the upstart New Republic and the traitorous Imperial factions would be next in line to feel its unyielding grip.

Daraada grinned wickedly, his long nose bobbing up and down as he nodded to himself. Yes, that was indeed what he would do, just as soon as they were caught. Any moment and they would be in his clutches. How dare they even think of defying the Empire? Or of defying the great Major Gaevril Daraada, for that matter!

At that moment, the great commander Gaevril Daraada ceased his musings as he noticed a strike speeder roaring away from the bar at full speed. He squinted at it, checking the markings.

It couldn't be? Could it? Daraada lifted his comlink to his lips. 'Major Daraada to Group C. Report.' His only response was silence. Daraada sprinted around the building, followed by a half-dozen surprised stormtroopers who hurried to catch up with their leader.

The Major ran around the corner and his jaw nearly fell open. The alley was empty, except for four of his men who were strewn across the dirty pavement and among the garbage containers. His eyes widened in shock and all he could do was offer an enraged scream.

* * *

"So what's your story?"

Shandria looked up from the controls and smiled.

"You're New Republic, aren't you?" he asked.

"How did you know?"

"None of you guys ever give up any information easily. Ask for the time of day and you get looked at like you were an ISB agent. Habit from the Rebellion days, I guess..."

"You know that old human maxim -- old habits die hard."

"And so do the Rebels,..."

Shandria widened her grin, then shook her head in wonder. "Why are you helping me? I mean, you're a complete stranger. You're risking your life for me and I don't even know your name!"

Sconn extended his hand. "Sienn Sconn. Nice to meet you."

"Shandria L'hnnar," she said, taking his hand into hers. "And you didn't answer my question."

"What question?"

Shandria grunted. "And you think *we're* secretive"

Sconn laughed for a few moments, then seemed to grow deadly serious. "I hate the Empire."

"So do a lot of people. But not all of them do something about it."

"Well, this kind of stuff isn't exactly a habit for me."

She stared at him appraisingly. "Maybe it should be..."

"You seem to have mistaken me for a hero, lady." Sconn shook his head emphatically. "I'm just your average guy trying to make a living."

"What do you do, anyway?"

Sconn looked at her, then bit down on his lip. "I, uh... Well, I guess, I'm what you call a 'procurement specialist.'"

Shandria flashed a wry grin, "Oh. So, you're an ordinary thief."

Sconn's face flushed. "I may be a lot of things, but I am not ordinary. And other people may call me a thief, but other people still call you Rebels, even with your New Republic ... That doesn't make the description true." He took a deep breath, then continued, "If someone wants something, they hire me to 'acquire' it. Which I do, if and only if I think the target deserves it. And they're usually obscenely rich Imperial sympathizers. If that makes me a thief in your eyes, well so be it."

"I'm sorry. I didn't mean to offend you."

"Hey! I'm just a thief, remember? On a backwater planet, no less. I'm not easily offended."

"Not so backwater. If you knew what was going on here..."

"Don't tell me. I don't want to know."

"That's why the Empire is still around. Too many people like the bliss of ignorance."

Silence pervaded the strike speeder. Finally, Sconn cleared his throat. "So, where exactly does this transport stop?"

"Ven-Kavi Starport. I've got to get off this planet. I have information that must get to the New Republic immediately. Information that could save millions of lives,"

"So that's what this is about. Looks like we're not so different after all."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean, I steal material goods. You steal data."

Shandria frowned. "It's not the same thing at all."

"Why not?"

"You steal for profit. I'm doing what I do for the greater good."

"Well, so am I." Sconn jerked a thumb to his chest. "*My* greater good."

Shandria sighed, slowing down the strike speeder. She pressed a button, opening the door as the vehicle pulled to a stop.

Sconn glanced at the exit and then back at her. "What are you doing?"

"Letting you out. This isn't your concern. You helped me escape. And for that, I'm grateful. If there's anything I can do to repay --"

"Wait just a minute."

"What?"

"I'm not bailing out here! You have to get your information back to the New Republic." He pushed the button and the door closed, "And believe me, you're going to need all the help you can get."

"But..."

"Back at the Binary, I made you a promise. And I always keep my promises."

"You're a difficult person to figure out, Soon Sconn"

"I told you .. one of a kind," he grinned at her and gave a quick wink. "Now, lets go."

* * *

"Hurry! Speed this thing up! That's an order,"

Major Daraada slapped the back of the pilot's chair and glanced out the viewshield. The two strike speeders were in pursuit of the captured vehicle, but their quarry had a large head start. No matter. He would get them. "Where are they now?"

"Just passing Herak Square," The co-pilot turned to look at the Major. "Looks like they're headed for the starport, sir."

"Yes, yes. Trying to make good their escape. Well, I will not allow it! That datacard will not get off this planet!" He lifted up his comlink. "This is Major Daraada. Get me Imperial Governor Vaerganth at once. It's an emergency."

A tired voice echoed over the comlink. "What is it now, Daraada?"

"The Rebel is headed for the starport!"

A sarcastic laugh echoed over the comlink, "Which one?"

"The one with the datacard containing the plans for Project Orrad, You must divert the *Retaliator* immediately."

"Impossible. It's engaged with the terrorist forces in the Southern Reach."

"But this is top priority!"

"So are those damnable terrorists! And I am not about to tie up our only Star Destroyer in the hunt for a single Rebel!"

"TIE fighters, then. Surely you could spare a few..."

"They are in the midst of a dogfight that they are losing at the moment. I can't help you, Daraada, You'll have to handle it yourself. That's what you get paid for!"

"This is an outrage! The data card in the Rebel's possession is of great importance to the Empire. I shall report this immediately!"

"To who, the Emperor? All the insane Imperial warlords trying to assume that mantle? Please, Daraada, Spare me your idiotic threats."

"Fine," Daraada hissed. "I'll do it myself. Daraada out." Still fuming, the Major changed the frequency on his comlink. "This is Major Daraada to Ven-Kavi Starport Authority. I have a stolen strike speeder headed your way. Listen to me, and listen closely. Aboard this vehicle are a New Republic spy and her accomplice. I want all available security to block off the main entrance. Nothing is to get through. And until I give the word, under no circumstances does any ship get departure or landing clearance. Keep all craft in a holding pattern. Is that clear?"

"Yes, sir," the comlink crackled in response.

"Good. Now get moving." Daraada turned to his operations officer. "Run the Delta emergency code. Special Operative 1312."

The officer was shocked. "The bounty hunter, sir?"

"Do it."

The co-pilot turned back around. "We're not going to be able to catch them before they get to the starport, sir."

"We don't have to, Starport Security will provide the front wall. All we need to do is close off the rear." Daraada grinned maliciously. "And Graphyt will do the rest..."

* * *

Sconn looked up from the nav terminal. "We're almost there. And the other two strike speeders are still way behind us."

Shandria laughed, a surprised giggle. "I think we're actually going to make it!"

A dull roar filled the cabin as something passed overhead. Sconn and Shadria exchanged a look. The roof shook as something landed on it.

"What was that?" Sconn said as he stared upwards.

Shandria looked up in alarm. "Someone's on the roof."

"Give me your hold-out. I'll check it out."

Shandria handed over the small blaster. "Be careful."

"I'm always careful," Sconn said as he unlocked the top hatch. As it opened, the rushing wind whipped Sconn's hair back into his face, blinding him. He pushed away the fallen locks, and brandishing the blaster in front of him, lifted himself up.

There was nothing on the back of the speeder but the mounted heavy repeating blaster, hanging uselessly on its stock and waiting to be fired. Shrugging, the thief turned to check the front of the vehicle.

Strong hands locked around Sconn's blaster arm as well as his neck, squeezed taut, and lifted him up with inhuman strength.

* * *

Shandria whirled around as Sconn was hauled up and out of the strike speeder. His kicking legs lingered for a second, then he was gone. Eyes wide, she turned back to stare at the road. Her voice came out as a low whisper. "Oh, no..."

* * *

Pentix Graphyt was huge. A mountain of a man, if that's what he truly was. Sconn couldn't exactly tell, since the giant's face was covered by a mirror-like helmet. All the thief saw was the reflection of himself being choked to death.

One of the bounty hunter's heavy gloved hands was crushing his throat, while the other was busy turning the bones of his right wrist into powder. Sconn roared in pain as he tried to aim the hold-out at his captor.

Graphyt merely squeezed harder. The pain was too much, and Sconn released the weapon. It clattered to the roof, then bounced off, careening away. The gun finally hit the road and shattered into a thousand pieces.

The thief figured that the bounty hunter's sizable mass, combined with the heavy chitinous black armor he wore, kept him standing upright even in the face of the buffeting winds. Sconn also realized that if the giant released him, he would endure the same fate as Shandria's hold-out blaster.

Sconn could barely breathe. He had to think of something fast. Graphyt was holding his right arm, but the attached wrist laser was still pointing in the necessary direction. If he could just stretch his arm.

Sconn screamed in pain, but managed to twist his wrist enough and fired off the laser. It struck the bounty hunter on the right shoulder-piece of his armor, but to Sconn's shock and horror, didn't even leave a scratch on the shiny surface.

From underneath the mirrored mask, a deep booming voice began to laugh.

Sconn was enraged. With his left arm, he reached back, under his nearly airborne cloak and wrapped his fingers around the familiar thick metal handle of his stun staff.

The bounty hunter was one step ahead of him, however, and slammed Sconn down on his back, wrenching the thief's left arm painfully in the socket and pinning it behind him. Sconn was in agony as Graphyt jammed the knee joint of his armor right into his midriff. All the while, the giant retained his hold on Sconn's neck and wrist.

The thief was having trouble seeing. Everything was getting dark and he couldn't draw a breath. Sconn began to realize that he was finally out of tricks. *This is it*, he thought angrily. *This was the end. Done in by some armored idiot who dropped in out of nowhere...*

Sconn's eyes widened as he spotted the rocket pack on the big bounty hunter's back. That explained the roar they had heard. That's how the hunter got aboard! The thief watched as the cooling vents released tiny hisses of smoke and a plan began to quickly form in Sconn's head.

The thief almost blacked out for a second, but fought off the darkness with sheer willpower. He focused on the cooling unit of the pack, locking his eyes on it. At the same time, he twisted his wrist and took aim with the laser. Waves of unconsciousness began to flow over him, a tide of darkness pulling him down. His eyes fluttered wildly. *Now or never*, Sconn thought -- then he fired off the beam.

His aim was true. The laser punctured the cooling unit, and a burst of flame mixed



with the escaping steam. Graphyt turned his head to look as a warning beep sounded, followed by a tinny computerized voice,

"Warning! Coolant core has been breached. One minute to destruct. Please stand clear." Flashing indicators were in the red. The pack was about to explode. Snarling, the hunter released Sconn and stumbled back, ripping desperately at the straps on his back and shoulders.

Sconn groaned and rolled over, grabbing onto the open hatch for support as the wind tore at his light body. He leaned his head down and saw Shandria staring up at him. Her face went from shock to relief. "Thank goodness..." She blushed a bit at the emotion that flooded out with her last statement, then her face was all business once again. "They've got the starport entrance sealed! And the other two strike speeders are right behind us!"

Sconn looked up right into the wind, and saw that it was true. A large array of stormtroopers, Imperial starport security personnel, and combat speeders blockaded the entrance. No two ways about it. They were trapped.

As he considered their options, the sound of a grunt behind him drew the thief's attention. Sconn turned and saw that the bounty hunter was still trying to struggle out of the pack. The straps were caught in the jointed segments of the armor, which hampered the giant's movements even further.

"Thirty seconds to destruct," intoned the computer, and Sconn grinned. He leaned down to yell at Shandria. "Speed up!"

"What!?"

"Do it!"

"You're crazy, you know that?"

"It's my best quality."

"What's your worst? Never mind, I don't want to know!"

Laughing, Sconn reached into his pouch and pulled out two silver half-spheres. He leaped onto the struggling bounty hunter's back and locked them into place on the pack's cylindrical body. Graphyt whirled around and swung at him, but the thief ducked under the arm and came up right in front of the bounty hunter using his large body as a shield against the wind.

"Fifteen seconds to destruct," announced the voice.

Sconn reached for the rocket pack's control unit attached to Graphyt's right chest-piece and pressed the power button. The thief quickly dropped to the roof of the vehicle and rolled forward. Sconn's motion drove his coiled body directly into the bounty hunter's legs, toppling Graphyt forward just as the pack fired wildly, emitting a burst of incredible power.

Screaming, Graphyt and his runaway jet pack streaked forward at twice the strike speeder's speed.

From the cockpit, Shandria watched in wonder as the struggling giant soared overhead, headed right for the Imperial blockade at full speed.

Grinning, Sconn hopped back down into the cockpit and pulled out the silver control unit. As the bounty hunter streaked into the front of the blockade, Sconn hit the control switch.

The explosion that followed shook the entire area, throwing two of the combat speeders into the air like toys. A gout of flame roared out from the center of the explosion.

Sconn gestured wildly at the hole, "There's our hole! Punch it!"

Shandria pushed the strike speeder to its limit and the vehicle roared in response, tearing into the flaming hole at full speed. Sconn wrapped his arms around Shandria and both of them ducked down as the viewshield exploded from heat expansion.

The strike speeder rammed two more airtroopers, enduring minor damage from the collisions and flames. It finally roared out the other side of the blockade at full speed, streaming a trail of fire and wreckage behind it.

Sconn and Shandria looked up, amazed that they were still alive, and headed right for the docking bays. Sconn let out an excited whoop and Shandria couldn't contain her smile.

Their celebration was cut short, however, as the strike speeder began to shake and groan.

"This thing isn't going to make it much farther," Sconn said.

"Luckily we don't have far to go. My docking bay is right up there."

"Better hurry," Sconn warned as he checked the computers. "Those Imperials don't look like they're ready to give up just yet!"

* * *

"Don't turn, you idiots! Follow their path!" Daraada's scream echoed through the strike speeder as he dove for the controls. The pilot's instinct had been to try and avoid the flaming wreckage, but it was a tactical mistake, as Daraada realized. At the speed they were going, it would also be a deadly one.

The other pursuing strike speeder had already tried to swerve, but the maneuver resulted in the vehicle crashing into what was left of the blockade and exploding.

Daraada's quick-winking and action saved his vehicle and his life. The speeder screamed through the hole as easily as the stolen one did. The pilots exchanged relieved glances, but they didn't last long as Daraada barked orders in their faces.

"Now keep on them! They must not escape!" Daraada sat back in his chair and added in a threatening whisper, "But if they do, the interrogation rooms will still all be occupied,"

* * *

"There it is," Shandria yelled. "There's my ship!"

The stolen speeder screeched to a halt at the entrance to docking bay 18, and Shandria nearly leaped out the door. Sconn followed, glancing at the Y-wing fighter inside.

"There's room for two, you know," Shandria added softly.

The thief smiled, then glanced over his shoulder as he heard the other strike speeder approaching. It would be on top of them very shortly.

"You'd better get going," he said quietly. "I'll hold 'em off as long as I can."

"Why don't you come with me? We could use someone with your ... talents."

"Me? Join the New Republic?" Sconn laughed. "I don't think so."

Shandria glanced at the approaching vehicle with a worried look, "I can't just leave you here. They'll kill you."

"If they catch me, maybe. It's not your problem. You've got a job to finish. *That's* your problem. Now, go ahead ... get going."

"I'll never forget this," Shandria hugged him tightly and whispered in his hear. "I'll never forget you." Before Sconn could say anything, she kissed him on the lips. Softly and tenderly.

"You really are one of a kind, Sienn Sconn." With that, she turned and ran to her ship, but Sconn was too busy letting her softly scented smell wash over him to notice.

The pursuing strike speeder's imminent arrival snapped him out of his reverie. Sconn turned and hopped back onto the stolen speeder. He quickly made his way across the roof and hopped into the gunner's niche. The thief grabbed a hold of the mounted heavy blaster cannon and turned the large weapon towards the other strikespeeder. He opened fire, raking blasts across the approaching vehicle -- which slowed down considerably.

The roar of powerful engines drew Sconn's attention upwards and he watched Shandria's ship lift up from its docking bay. He saw her face for an instant and grinned, flashing a quick wink.

Inside the Y-wing, Shandria quickly wiped a tear from her cheek. "May the Force be with you," she whispered, and punched the engines.

The Y-wing roared up into the atmosphere, and was nothing more than a tiny set of twinkling lights.

Sconn grinned and gave the disappearing craft a quick salute.

Blaster fire streaked across his speeder, rocking it. As Sconn climbed out of the gunner's seat, the blaster cannon was hit. The heavy weapon exploded, and the force of the blast knocked him down into the cockpit of the vehicle.

Grunting in pain from his hard landing, Sconn got to his feet and checked the speeder's controls. It wouldn't be going anywhere anytime soon. The thief looked out the side viewport.

The last strike speeder was closing in, followed by a large force that seemed to flow from every corner of the starport.

Sconn frowned and quickly exited the useless speeder and checked the landing bay. He was definitely trapped. "Hmmm. Better overprepared than under the ground," the thief said softly. "But how could you prepare for this?"

Sconn began quickly backing up, into the docking bay and away from the approaching vehicles. "Think, think. Come on, Sconn..."

The back of the thief's right foot hit a large fuel line and he fell backwards, landing on his rear end, "Great. Not only am I going to die, I'm going to die without a shred of dignity."

As Sconn got to his feet, he spotted what it was he had landed on. It was a locked, metallic access panel that read, "Caution: power/fuel maintenance conduit -- official starport use only." A grin slowly spread across the thief's face as he powered up his wrist laser.

"Then again, maybe being under the ground isn't so bad after all..."

* * *

The stormtroopers approached Daraada, who watched with a creased brow as his men literally tore the stolen speeder apart.

"No sign of anyone, sir," reported the first trooper.

Daraada frowned, looking ready to explode into a blind rage. Nodding, he waved the two troopers off. They had managed to escape -- the woman had, at least, with the stolen datacard. And her accomplice was nowhere to be found. The Major's shoulders slumped. This was not his day...

Slowly, though, a smile crept across his face as he stared at the command team from the speeder. His interrogation chamber would have no Rebels, but it would be occupied nonetheless. Grinning maliciously at the thought of prisoners begging him to spare their miserable lives, Daraada started toward the group. The Major stepped right onto the maintenance access panel, but was so intent on his soon-to-be prey, he took no notice of it.

* * *

Sconn stopped crawling for a moment as he heard the heavy footfall on the access panel echo through the maintenance tunnel. He drew a deep breath and waited.

No other sound followed. Exhaling in relief, the thief continued to squeeze forward into the tight, dimly lit shaft, giving thanks every few meters that he hadn't inherited his uncle's eating habits.

Dirty and a bit disheveled from his tour of the maintenance tunnel, Sconn moved quickly through the crowded starport, never looking back. For the first time in his life, the one-of-a-kind thief was glad he had a face that didn't stand out in a crowd.



Sconn spotted a mirror and smiled at his image, smoothing his cloak as he passed. His fingers hit something rough at his side. The thief curiously checked into his pocket. Inside was a cred stick. Shocked, Sconn quickly examined the screen readout. Twenty-five thousand credits, and a message. He cycled it and read:

"Try not to steal from anybody for a while, okay?" -- Shandria

Sconn laughed all the way to his apartment, arriving as dusk fell -- just in time to pay his landlord.

After the Devaronian had taken her credits and left, he snuck up to the roof and sat down under the blanket of night. As the cool breeze swept over him, Sienn Sconn stared up at the twinkling stars, wondering which one Shandria was heading for. And a warm smile slowly spread across his face.

It had been a really great day ...